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KT photo | **Tim Bath**

House of Burgess: Syrian refugees feed homeless

Meanwhile, Republicans ignore destitute veterans

By Rob Burgess
Tribune columnist

As I wrote in my Nov. 18 column, “Paris and return of ‘whataboutism,’” sincere grief about the Paris massacres has been met with the wagging fingers of those who cited more obscure tragedies as a counterpoint. These charlatans disbelieve in multitasking, instead favoring a binary worldview.

They just couldn’t wait to inform everyone of a less-discussed sadness you weren’t already sad about because you were somehow less enlightened.

I may have been content to give my criticism of this logical fallacy a rest, but the forces of whataboutism had other designs. Scratch the surface of any argument against taking Syrian civil war refugees, and you'll encounter the following contention: We need to help our homeless first.

Fine. Let us explore that claim.

Whataboutists believe concentration on only one subject at a time is permissible. As such, they will consistently ignore their chosen examples unless they wield them like cudgels. You won't catch them discussing these topics otherwise. But while this conservative stripe of whataboutism has the floor, let us look at Republicans' record of care for our homeless, especially veterans:

• "Will escalating Republican attacks on Social Security disability benefits cause an increase in homeless people across America? Quite possibly, say advocates for disabled and mentally ill Americans, citing the growing attacks on the Social Security Disability Insurance program in Congress and on the presidential trail." (Steven Rosenfeld, AlterNet, Jan. 14.)

• "S. 1982: Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014. A bill to improve the provision of medical services and benefits to veterans, and for other purposes. Motion rejected 56-42. (All but two Republicans voting against.)" (U.S. Senate, Feb. 27.)

• “Last week, the House Subcommittee for Transportation, Housing, and Urban Development approved a bill that cuts funding for affordable housing for the lowest income households. The move by House Republicans imperils a crucial resource that can help address homelessness. “ (Shiv Rawal, ThinkProgress, May 4.)

While the GOP has ignored homeless veterans, some Syrian refugees have stepped up. On Thanksgiving, homeless veterans at Millionair Club Charity were fed at “an event hosted by the Seattle area’s Muslim community. It’s called ‘Day of Dignity,’ and it’s been hosted by the Muslim community for the last 10 years. They give out sleeping bags, haircuts and other items to hundreds of homeless people,” KUOW’s Liz Jones reported Nov 22. “Among the volunteers were two brothers — [Nabil Al-Salkini, 14, and Yazan Al-Salkini, 19,] Syrian refugees who came to Seattle with their family a few months ago. The brothers volunteer at events like this because they say they want to give back to the community that’s welcomed them.”

Compare that to Washington state lawmakers’ lack of care for their destitute. “At a Senate Financial Institutions, Housing, and Insurance Committee hearing, Republican State Sen. Jan Angel suddenly, to the astonishment of her colleagues, killed off a bill [ESHB 2368] that funds most of the state’s homeless programs,” reported The Stranger’s Ansel Herz Feb. 28.

And, over in Germany, another Syrian refugee sought to repay the kindness shown him. “A refugee has been photographed handing out hot meals to the homeless in Germany to ‘give something back to the people that helped’ him,” reported The Telegraph’s Mark Malloy Nov. 24. “Alex Assali fled Damascus in 2007 to start a new life in Germany after posting critical messages about Syrian President Bashar al-Assad online. … Every Saturday he sets up outside Berlin’s Alexanderplatz station to give out hot meals to around 100 people who are sleeping rough.”

I have decided there is a way I will forgive whataboutists: If they are willing to fully commit to their arguments, I’ll let it slide. Let’s see them advocate for a social safety net for homeless veterans when it’s not just convenient to the point they are attempting to make.

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